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Widening HE participation in the arts: Impacts of an access module on learner preparedness

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ahh**John Butcher**  and **Anactoria Clarke**

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Abstract

Despite the plethora of research on widening participation in the last 20 years, access to the arts and humanities has remained relatively under-explored, especially in relation to the preparedness of adult learners. This article reports a case study investigating the impact of an arts and languages Access module at the UK Open University. Findings from interviews with 37 Access students were analysed in relation to four themes: the need for Access preparation; generic studentship skills; discipline-specific skills; intrinsic enjoyment and interdisciplinary study. We conclude embedded generic skills enhance learner confidence and time management, while academic literacy skills relevant to the arts and humanities enhance cultural capital and enable disadvantaged learners to access challenging disciplines. The impact of a preparatory arts and humanities module extends into the lives of individual students, suggesting a counter-narrative to the prevailing, ‘economic value’ paradigms of higher education policymakers.

Keywords

Widening participation, access, preparation, arts and humanities, adult learners

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Introduction

From its inception in 2002, this journal has aimed to promote research-led pedagogy across arts and humanities disciplines, and early in its publication history identified an issue that more students from disadvantaged backgrounds were engaging with HE but were differentially qualified and prepared. The journal's very first editorial questioned the implications for curriculum design of access courses (Chambers et al., 2002: 8), which still prepare hundreds of mature arts and humanities students per year in the UK, mainly in colleges of further education (local institutions providing a range of post-16 education) but also in some universities.

In subsequent early articles in this very journal, the idea that transition challenges might be greater in the Arts and Humanities (Marland, 2003) were mooted, noting the mismatch between experience and skills which could lead to early drop-out – with appropriate preparation regarded as a key mitigation. This issue of appropriate preparation signals the need, in the UK, to offer some kind of bridging pedagogy, recognising that the shift to independent learning in HE required the development of time management skills (Smith and Hopkins, 2005) for some A-Level (university matriculation level) entrants at age 18. If this was true for some 'traditional' learners, it was even more crucial for adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (Shattock, 2010).

The UK Open University (OU) has been preparing adult learners through open entry distance learning for access to the arts and humanities since its inception 50 years ago. Originally, skills development and study support were embedded in Foundation stages, which most learners took ahead of, and in addition to, their undergraduate open degree. In the 1990s, recognising the needs of increasing numbers of learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, the OU introduced a series of *Openings* modules, including *Living Arts* (Y152, originally a credit-free 'taster') and later *Making Sense of the Arts* (Y160, which evolved into a 10 and then 15 credit Level 4 (first year undergraduate) module). These interdisciplinary modules were designed to offer a supported path into undergraduate study in the arts and humanities and were priced accessibly.

Following the introduction of higher tuition fees and a loan system for all HE provision in England in 2012, the OU introduced a 30 credit *Arts and languages* Access module (Y031), assessed at Level 0 (pre-undergraduate preparation). It is studied part-time (10 hours per week) over 30 weeks and is one option in a suite of three modules across a programme aimed at learners with low prior entry qualifications, or those who have been out of education for years. In order to address issues around financial barriers to participation, full fee waivers are available for students on low household incomes.

Such students represent what Tuhiwai-Smith (2012) identifies as 'othered' learners, marginalised in university study and excluded from the positional superiority of academic disciplines. We are firmly of the view that, as long as students think

they have to abandon the resources of their home culture in order to succeed in education, a significant proportion will drop out or fail trying (Geisler, 1994).

While we were keen to mitigate the deficit tendency in HE of seeking to ‘bend’ disadvantaged students (Butcher and Marr, 2020), we recognised the need to socialise them into discipline specific HE rules and conventions (Ballard and Clanchy, 1988), and to prepare them for ‘epistemological access’ (Boughey, 2003: 67). Therefore, the module team drew on scholarship exploring the intersection of adult learning approaches and widening participation (in the UK, addressing access and attainment gaps in students from groups under-represented in HE) – initiatives to target adult learners who, while interested in the arts, were lacking in confidence and unsure of their capability for coping with HE. As a result, seven innovative elements were designed-in to the module. These are intended to help adult learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, with the challenge of engaging with a university arts curriculum:

- Tutors (who teach and support individual learners through pro-active telephone contact) engage in staff development, and are monitored, to support the embedding of skills associated with a more inclusive approach to teaching and learning in their assessment feedback. They are appointed on their experience/competence in teaching at Level 0 as well as any specific subject specialism, so tend to be very committed and empathetic with the needs of adult learners from disadvantaged backgrounds;
- The curriculum is delivered through an innovatively designed path from print material to online study, with regular opportunities for formative assessment feedback. This deliberately prepares students for the blended mode of learning (online interactive and print teaching materials, face-to-face and online synchronous/asynchronous tutor support) they will encounter at undergraduate level at the OU;
- Study skills (including support for time management, reading/notetaking and academic writing) are embedded throughout the module materials and their development is regularly reflected upon;
- Thematic cross-disciplinary connections are designed-in (for example the theme of protest is studied via content from three cognate disciplines: art history; literature; history, with optional activities in creative writing and linguistics).
- Scaffolding via a ‘study diamond’ framework has been developed to support students to critically engage with arts content via an ‘Effects–Techniques–Context–Meaning’ pedagogic approach. This is introduced and used throughout the module (Clifton, 2012).
- Personalisation in the learner journey through the material is offered through options week, reflective activities and assessment choices, enabling students to develop some agency in their learning journey (Curry and Butcher, 2021).
- Module authors have reviewed the wording of questions and guidance on assessment to minimise the need for students to adapt to the obfuscated technical language of HE assessment (Butcher et al., 2017).

The OU Arts and languages Access module has attracted 6K adult students new to HE since 2013. Of those who pass their Access module, the majority progress to undergraduate study at the OU (especially BA Humanities, BA English Literature, BA History).

This article explores the experiences and perceptions of a sample of students on the Arts and languages Access module, in order to better understand the impact of discipline-specific and generic skills' preparation on learners from backgrounds associated with widening participation characteristics. The research took an institutional case study approach (Yin, 2009) utilising data from students to identify the effect of taking the Access module on aspiring arts undergraduates. Our findings on the power of effective preparation for arts and humanities students from disadvantaged backgrounds may offer tangible ideas for other institutions seeking to enhance skills and confidence and enable more students who enter with different/lower prior qualifications to succeed in the arts and humanities.

Literature

In reviewing the literature on access to the arts and humanities, four critical themes can be identified:

1. Access: Generic skills preparation for part-time adults?

Access courses in the UK have, since the 1980s, offered an alternative to the traditional A level entry route to university. They have prepared students with low prior qualifications, or those who have been out of education for years, to progress to undergraduate study. As such, they have contributed to efforts to widen participation. Although formal policy efforts in the UK to widen participation following the Dearing review originated in a drive for greater social justice, policies have since (Brown, 2007) morphed into assertions about the need for advanced skills to benefit the UK economy, and now can be viewed against a backdrop of worsening inequality in society. Despite 20 years of effort and millions spent on widening participation across the UK, there remains a considerable inequity in access to HE with working class and ethnic minority students spread very differentially around institutions and achieving and progressing significantly worse than students from advantaged backgrounds. This has particularly impacted mature students in higher education, most of whom can only study part-time. In England, the decline in access is serious, with the number of mature students dropping by 61% in the last decade (OfS, 2019).

Although the OU (and other universities) have long histories of teaching part-time, the experience of part-time learners returning to education is under-researched. Hunt and Loxley (2020) identify a generic issue – students' sense of belonging in their institution – with an Irish perspective in which an instrumental policy focus on employability and re-skilling masks the heterogeneity of part-time student perspectives and the obstacles to persistence they overcome – despite a

profound lack of integration into the institution. This is amplified by the mature part-time learner voices quoted in Butcher (2020), who emphasised the impact of life disruptions, of money worries and institutional inflexibility on their studies.

The challenges faced by mature learners on Access courses were explored by Reay et al. (2002) who identified transition difficulties as especially problematic at the complex intersections of ethnicity, gender and marital status, compounded by the consequences of class. The greatest obstacles were faced by time-poor working-class lone mothers, (the uncared-for carers) for whom time to study was non-negotiable time away from others, and who existed in precarious financial situations. Choice to participate in HE was described as finding out what you cannot have and looking for the few options left – similar to the predicament described as a Hobson's choice by Butcher and Rose-Adams (2015).

The challenge of accessing the arts and humanities is especially pressing in England, given policy-makers' infatuation with valuing subjects ostensibly contributing to the national economy by advancing technological skills. For example, funding restrictions for Equivalent or Lower Qualifications (ELQ) have been relaxed for STEM (Science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects since 2013, and there has been an explicit emphasis in policies targeting employment opportunities requiring a background in STEM (DBIS, 2009). In contrast, so-called softer subjects like arts and humanities are increasingly (though erroneously) caricatured by government ministers as doing nothing to improve life chances (Donelan, 2020), or career goals (Garner, 2014). There is a danger that mature learners from disadvantaged backgrounds will perceive the arts and humanities as risky and unattractive, with the consequence that participation will narrow. Are policy makers and sector leaders sufficiently confident about the value of studying the arts and humanities, when questions can be raised about the extent to which our courses prepare students to think and act critically as preparation for a technology dependant world?

2. Study skills as preparation for the arts and humanities

Adequate and effective preparation has presented a remediation conundrum in the arts and humanities, in that universities have effectively constructed a discourse of disadvantage by seeking to provide 'support' for 'deficient' students (those from non-traditional backgrounds) via skills development and enculturation into the higher education world (Boughey, 2003). This positions adult learners in particular as a 'problem' in the arts and humanities – and masks any imperative to give thought to the need for systemic transformation of a higher education system.

In order to gain confidence in studying, many mature learners need some sort of bridging experience. In an Australian setting, Johnson and Watson (2004) explored the attributes of a 'successful' mature student identity. These included: computer literacy; realism about the workload needed to complete assessment tasks; accepting the need to unlearn some skills gained in the past and the opportunity to reflect on learner identity. These have ramifications for the design of Access pedagogies

which will be explored later in the discussion. In contrast, attributes associated with early withdrawal which need to be ‘designed-out’ of Access provision included: inappropriate social and cultural practices; the undervaluing of tacit knowledge, and not fitting in.

An innovative approach to community-based access to the arts and humanities has been reported in Butcher (2017). In this programme, co-designed tasters with local organisations (including those working with ex-offenders, refugees and asylum seekers, single parent families and local ethnic minority communities) led to a full-time Foundation Year and subsequent progression to undergraduate study in literature at a prestigious selective university. While a positive and transformational story for some individuals, this also exposed the obstacle of financial pressures for disadvantaged adults, and the barriers of race and class in terms of ‘belonging’ to the university (Johnson, 2018).

Key themes associated with teaching a more diverse student body in the arts and humanities can be discerned in the accessible and inclusive pedagogies which help students with disabilities overcome barriers to traditional learning. For example, Carballo et al. (2019) explored with arts and humanities faculty staff in a Spanish context how working ‘with’ learners, basing teaching decisions on their students’ opinions, and knowing their students, produced adjustments which benefitted all. Key insights emerged from a faculty philosophy by which there was belief in the capacities of all students, leading to flexible and helpful teachers who shared plans and used initial contact to gauge what learners needed and to adapt accordingly. This overcame obstacles (many of which reportedly stemmed from faculty teaching approaches) and resulted in more active and participatory learning and a more effective use of regular formative assessment.

Advanced skills in academic reading and writing are obviously crucial to success in the arts and humanities. Baker et al. (2019) identify a key under-researched question (a ‘silence’) in relation to meaningful participation and equity in HE, that of academic reading. They contrast this gap in knowledge with the plethora of research on writing (see for example Tapp, 2015), while regretting the reductive focus on surface elements (grammar, spelling, punctuation) as a technical skill. They question the sociocultural practice of academic reading in the context of power dynamics (assessment in HE) and disciplinary epistemologies, systemic and structural barriers, by which the transition to university privileges the traditional articulate middle class.

Reading and writing are deeply embedded socio-cultural practices, and the critique of different definitions of literacy is well-established (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1993). Street (1984) makes strong links to the ideological use to which conceptions of literacy are put, and challenges claims about the social and cognitive consequences of literacy represented in the autonomous model. He rejects grandiose claims for the essay model of literacy, through which a small dominant elite attempt to maintain positions of power in a class-based UK education system.

Lea and Street (2006) recognise academic practices require students to switch writing styles, modes and genres between one setting and another, to deploy a

repertoire of literary practices appropriate to each setting and handle the social meanings and identities that each invoke. They challenge the dominant deficit model of study skills in which surface/formal writing and the transmission of knowledge excludes the explicit range of transformations and meaning-making processes which treat students as collaborators in the development of academic literacies necessary for HE engagement. For them, academic socialisation (acculturation into disciplinary discourses, in different genres, to construct knowledge) and academic literacies (the power implicit in what counts as authority in a discipline) all overlap.

Geisler (1994) questions whether academic literacy is an arcane practice restricted to just a few, linked historically to the professionalisation of knowledge as the domain of expertise. She argues for bifurcated practice, traded between abstract domain content and the rhetorical process (in which HE authors are credible or discredited). She identifies the importance of cultural capital, the cultural practice of expertise, with the middle classes positioned as textual agents. Writing, even at undergraduate level simply duplicates the knowledge structure of (text)books but is regarded as different from and superior to the indigenous knowledge of laypersons brought from home cultures.

However, if academic writing remains a barrier, excluding those not able to participate, and positioning them permanently on the periphery of the academic community, Hale (2020) argues literacy deficits are not the main barrier, and support for these skills can be scaffolded in the first year.

3. Preparatory pedagogies and inclusive assessment in the arts and humanities

While what enables success for students studying in the humanities can be a contested space, the perceptions of lecturers about effective teaching and learning approaches can be enlightening. Zemits and Hodson (2016), draw on three perspectives, first informed by Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, assessing whether students' social assets gave them familiarity with markers of social mobility, particularly familiarity with the 'high culture' of the arts. Second, Freire's assertions about the necessity to make learning relevant if students had engaged in little previous formal learning. Third, humanistic ideas around critical thinking. Their findings, based on research with teachers on an online enabling programme in Australia, identify the importance of fostering awareness of personal perspectives on historical and contemporary events, and encouraging awareness of the contested nature of meaning. They assert tutors in the humanities cannot assume knowledge of a discipline or academic practice, but rather need to build content for those whose cultural capital is outside academia.

Zemits and Hodson question the extent to which humanities lecturers focus on marginalised, non-traditional adults, and conclude university practices need shifting away from elitist tendencies which shun those with 'low' cultural capital. They criticise disembodied skills courses, as well as generic approaches to transition.

They recommend the enculturation of pastoral care for mature students in order to address three barriers to access:

- Dispositional, by which learners from disadvantaged backgrounds struggle with a lack of confidence by carrying poor perceptions of themselves as learners.
- Situational, by which mature students worry about the financing of their HE studies and keeping jobs, and thus struggle to prioritise learning.
- Institutional, by which adults with competing personal priorities struggle against the inflexibility of university systems.

The perceived lack of cultural capital in students from widening participation backgrounds is explored by Donovan and Erskine-Shaw (2020). They identified examples of invisible pedagogic practices in the arts and humanities such as: critical analysis; structure; argument, which have pushed universities towards a deficit model of ‘academic literacy support’, echoing the earlier point raised by Boughey (2003). Rather than falling into this ‘deficit’ trap, they advocated individual learners adopting a new ‘academic’ identity. However, for mature students this could easily conflict with an adult’s established identity, and even if established, could remain fragile.

Research into pedagogic approaches that address student doubt (seriously thinking about withdrawing) has established that while mature learners were found to possess better coping skills (the courage derived from life experiences) than traditional younger learners, adults were not always aware of them, and Xuereb (2015) recommends teaching learners how to apply them in an academic context. She also found additional skills sessions were inadequate, and rather, a more effective personal tutoring system in which support was offered across all years (and not just for new entrants) was recommended. Support in the transformation of a learner’s identity appears central to effective learning at Access level.

Another under-researched element in successfully widening participation in the arts and humanities may be the need to develop assessment literacy. Wilson et al. (2016), although reporting on conventional A level entrants to English degrees, identified that some students will meet forms of assessment with which they are unfamiliar at university, adding to complaints by lecturers that young undergraduates are not adequately prepared for greater learner autonomy, and do not engage with the guidance provided. Their recommendation is for universities to make efforts to understand their learners’ prior experiences.

However, too often, the language in which assessment in the arts and humanities is framed implies that assessment is being done to students, rather than students being active participants in the process. In a previous study (Butcher et al., 2017), OU Access students commented they found the language of assessment opaque, and harsh, and that tutors had to spend a lot of time mediating assessment language to explain what students were being asked to do. Non-inclusive and technical language predominated. In a well-intentioned effort to explain assessment to students, the original assessment guidance on Y031 (a 30

credit, Level 0 module) was 51 pages, and resulted in confusion rather than clarification.

It is also, of course, the engagement with assessment feedback which can lead to student success. Shields (2015) identified the emotional impact of the first piece of feedback as being dependant on: prior experience of education; the significance participants attached to the feedback; the connection between the interpretation of feedback comments and beliefs about themselves as learners. She advocated early regular low stake assessments which fed back if students were on the right lines.

4. Enjoyment and interdisciplinary arts and humanities: A counternarrative to employability?

In a UK-wide report on part-time learners, Butcher (2015) noted disciplinary differences. Unlike gendered and employability-related drivers for studying STEM and Education/health subjects, students opting for arts subjects were less driven by the need or desire to gain qualifications, but rather the distinctive personal engagement around love of subject. Part-time learners in the arts appreciated access to expertise and embraced a conception of personal transformation, in which students had previously been discouraged from studying subjects in which they were unlikely to make a living. Both men and women reported studying the arts as an immersive experience related to personal lifestyle (this group did not talk about ‘juggling’ studies, and they were insistent they were not ‘leisure learners’). Although they had no time to study full-time, their commitment went way beyond the odd evening class.

While most OU students have chosen, since the 1990s, to graduate with a named single subject undergraduate qualification, the preparatory Access module and the first Level 4 module introducing the arts and humanities are interdisciplinary. Students report enjoying the opportunity to engage with subjects they had not considered, and around 25% of Access students change their intended degree route as a result. Strong emancipatory and participatory arguments for the power of interdisciplinary study to transform and engage mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds in a Foundation Year can be found in Sperlinger et al. (2018). Adult students in their study enjoyed the opportunity to think and discuss critically, a point identified by Condee (2016), who argues persuasively for critical thinking in teaching and learning in the humanities, with interdisciplinarity providing an opportunity for a C21st recalibration of connecting together. Teaching approaches across the arts and humanities which promote critical thinking, and foster a disposition towards critical thinking (Dumitru, 2019) engender open-mindedness. Critical attitudes emerge from creative and critical thinking in the arts and humanities environment, in turn promoting the creation of meaning (enjoying producing something new, if not necessarily original).

There have been efforts, especially in US schools, to utilise the arts in critical thinking and problem-solving approaches with STEM subjects (‘STEAM’) but these remain under-conceptualised (Quigley et al., 2019).

Methodology

In the context of an open entry distance learning institution, we were keen to explore the extent to which, and in what ways, the Arts and languages Access module prepared students from disadvantaged backgrounds to progress to undergraduate study. As the context of the study was highly pertinent (Yin, 2004), we made a methodological decision to conduct an institutional case study (Stake, 1995) using qualitative methods in an interpretive paradigm. The case we studied was bounded by the institution and the specific module under scrutiny. Based on themes emerging in the literature, and the authors' professional knowledge gained from working on the production and presentation of the module for eight years, our research questioned how effective an arts Access module was in preparing part-time mature learners for their first 60 credit undergraduate arts module.

The case and research question were framed by the demographic context of the learners - the majority of whom were mature, from disadvantaged backgrounds and who possessed low prior entry qualifications. To understand the impact of the Access module, we drew on students' qualitative perceptions of the effect of an Arts and languages module to identify common and unique features of the Access learning experience.

In order to gather the unique perceptions and lived experiences from the learners who had studied on the Access module and to evaluate its impact, we elicited the voices of a convenience sample of students completing their module. Data was gathered through semi-structured telephone interviews with 37 students who had volunteered to be involved following an invitation via email in the module forum. On average, each interview took about 25 minutes and was digitally recorded.

Since the OU introduced their Access programme in 2013, institutional statistics have persistently indicated that students with low previous educational qualifications who are new to the university, and who study an Access module before progressing onto their degree-level study, perform on average to a standard 10% higher than their contemporaries from similar backgrounds who enter the university directly into level 4. Whilst we know that this happens across all three Access modules (for example, for STEM see Butcher, 2017), this scholarship sought to explore if there were Arts-specific ways in which tutors and students could measure a greater degree of confidence and/or competency.

The questions asked to students were developed and refined by the researchers, and after testing on a colleague for reliability were structured to cover:

- whether student confidence had been affected by studying the Arts and languages Access module;
- the extent to which students felt prepared to progress in their studies onto an undergraduate qualification in arts and humanities;

- what study skills were impacted by their studying the Access module;
- how knowledge of arts subjects was enhanced by studying the module;
- whether telephone tuition had met their needs as a student new to university study in the arts;
- whether students felt isolated by studying the arts alone, or if they felt part of the broader student community (utilising student forums, for example);
- if students had at any point considered giving up their arts studies, and if so, what had motivated them to continue.

In analysing the qualitative data collected, we used a lens drawing on theories associated with widening participation, especially Bourdieu and cultural capital. Interviews were transcribed by one of the researchers, and the raw data was initially analysed separately by each researcher through a process of continual comparison drawing on Corbin and Strauss' (2008) concept-driven theoretical sampling. This allowed the development of emergent partial conceptual frameworks which were discussed to establish a consensus on the reliability of emerging themes. Concepts were then linked together to identify four main findings. While we cannot claim generalisability of the findings beyond the uncertainty of 'fuzzy generalisations' (Bassey, 1995) in which intelligent interpretations of other similar cases, in other contexts, can be made, we do suggest the importance of an 'Access effect'.

Findings

1. The impact of generic skills development: Confidence and time management

Fundamental to effective access to the arts and humanities, just as to other disciplines across HE, is that students from disadvantaged backgrounds feel confident that they can cope with the demands of study. Access modules act as preparation for part-time adults. If learners are adults who can only study part-time, it is particularly important they are supported to learn to organise their time efficiently.

The interviews with students revealed a broad consensus in relation to the positive impact of the Access module on personal learner confidence. One student indicated that:

...I was terribly unsure of if I was capable... the access course... just sort of reaffirm [ed] my capabilities ... (Interview 13)

Because Access students do not necessarily possess the standard matriculation requirements for a UK degree (two A levels), and because many Access students have experienced a significant gap since their previous experience of education (which might have been a negative one), individuals may lack a clear sense of

their own academic potential. A critical impact of taking an Access module in the arts and humanities seems to come from engaging in a relatively low risk academic programme which endorses that an adult has the skills to be a legitimate member of a university. This may be particularly true in the arts and humanities in which access to the academic canon can, too often, be assumed.

...the Access module ... gave me a chance to learn in the way that I was going to have to, or study in the way that I was going to have to without it being too pressured...
(Interview 16)

This suggests an important point about what might be termed an Access pedagogy – that teaching approaches need to prepare students for what they will experience on an undergraduate module. This Access module offered a realistic and authentic version of learning in HE, but a bridging one, tempered by an acknowledgement of the students' starting point. Students on an Access module are not going to be a homogeneous group, and as such may include vulnerable and tentative learners. An Access curriculum which takes students on a gentle trajectory, with opportunities for flexibility in relation to the pressure of formal deadlines, will offer a taste of HE in which undergraduate pressures are mitigated by a pro-active, empathetic and supportive tutoring model.

For example, one student stated:

I don't think I would have ever had the courage or the confidence to have gone straight away to do a degree without the Access module. (Interview 28)

This is a powerful confirmation of the impact of preparatory study. Not only is the issue of confidence addressed, represented as a personal barrier around agency and self-perception of students feeling as though they have the power to be effective learners which emerges strongly in the literature (e.g. Johnson, 2018), but the significance of adult students feeling brave enough to commit to HE study despite all the competing demands on their time and negative experiences from previous education is exposed. This invisible obstacle, the courage to engage with HE, is rarely reported in the pedagogic literature.

Even if students have studied previously in a different discipline, or a long time ago, they indicated that there were still issues about fitting study in around work or family commitments. This did not just relate to having the time to read module materials, or even to writing essays, but seemed a more general concern. For these distance learners, it was about learning how to get into the rhythm of study, and how to make effective use of the limited time they had available. This was an aspect of preparation that needed addressing before they committed to degree level study and longer, more intensive modules.

This aspect was borne out by students when they considered the specific study skills that had been improved by participating in the Access module. Time management was cited by over a quarter of respondents as a skill that had grown for

them during their study. For example, getting into ‘the routine of studying’ was cited by one student as an important part of their preparation to study further, and crucial to making the decision to continue studying:

I knew from before that I had this very bad habit of being a bit complacent and thinking it will be alright. And suddenly the assignment is on top of me and I'd be working until 2 in the morning to get it done. . . so that was one of the things I really wanted to work on. (Interview 14)

Learning to set themselves a routine of study seems an important outcome of Access study.

One student indicated that they had made the decision to postpone further study for a year, as two of her children were taking A-levels and preparing to go off to university in the next 12 months, so her time would be squeezed. Her comment, however, was that without having undertaken the Access module, she would not have realised that it would be so difficult to fit in to her family commitments and would probably have ended up withdrawing from study. This aligns with the kind of obstacles identified by Reay et al. (2002) that learners need to overcome to find the time within their competing commitments.

Another student reported learning to be organised in order to maximise the limited time to study available to them:

I work two jobs around doing the learning as well, so just knowing that there were certain things that I could do . . . when I had a spare five minutes here and there. . . having a list of activities that I could do, . . . they'd get ticked off the list. (Interview 35)

This is a reminder that the experience of HE is very different if a student must work – and in this instance the time pressure of multiple jobs echoes points made about juggling work and study in Butcher (2015).

2. Study skills as preparation for the arts and humanities

Although a range of study skills relevant to the arts and humanities were often referenced by students as beneficial outcomes, including greater confidence with grammar and academic writing, undertaking research, and studying online, the skill reported by far as being improved was note-taking. Students described being unaware, at first, of how many notes they should be taking, in what format, and to what end. However, by the final assignment, students had developed a method of note-taking that enabled them to find the information they required relatively easily and they had also realised that this meant that preparing essays was both easier, but also required more time.

Taking the time to plan their final assignment properly was cited as an important skill, and this was supported by the fact that students had been taking notes that they knew they must then employ in their work. Rather than rush the

completion of their assignment in one sitting with what they could easily find at the time, Access students reflected that a more prepared and informed approach had been learned:

I was taking too many notes, I was highlighting and typing ... doing too many. And then when I came to do my essay, I'd written down a whole load of stuff and then I couldn't find it. As I go into [the next module] I now have a new system set up, ... I can go back and know where to find it. (Interview 19)

This is an important impact in preparing students with the skills to succeed in the arts and humanities. Not only did it demonstrate understanding of the need to organise, summarise and synthesise extensive reading across a range of sources, but also enabled students to see (and get feedback on) the level of critical analysis and argument required to pass assessment at undergraduate level:

I can actually see when I look back at my first assignment to my last assignment, the sort of difference really...one of my goals at the beginning was, it sounds a bit daft, but to learn to learn if you will. (Interview 34)

This sophisticated link between a student organising their workload (as reported in Johnson and Wilson, 2004) to prepare an assessment and recognising that the initial planning and notes were fundamental to achieve a successful grade, is indicative of a learner positioned to thrive in HE:

The importance of planning and the importance of how the plan should really be what takes up most of your time ... was really important. (Interview 18)

This aligns with the assertions made in Hale (2020) that advanced literacy skills, as well as the invisible pedagogies identified in the arts and humanities by Donovan and Erskine-Shaw (2020) can be developed during a preparatory module:

I realised my third assignment flowed a lot better and subsequently I got a better mark for it...whereas before perhaps I was rambling a bit. (Interview 34)

So, a scaffolded learning experience, with assessment progressively weighted and regular supportive feedback, enabled the hidden assumptions in arts and humanities to be understood by students initially lacking confidence and appropriate skills:

It pointed me to the things I should have noticed before... construction of sentences...setting out a proper plan, not just rushing into things. (Interview 20)

The Access effect seems to have been to enable tentative students to learn how to learn and to translate that into assessments which demonstrate they have begun to acquire the invisible ‘rules’ of the arts and humanities disciplines.

3. The impact of preparatory pedagogies in the arts and humanities

The greatest difference in how students felt about their Access module was in the feedback on specific arts and humanities-related skills and knowledge. Three substantive disciplines are introduced to students on the Access module: poetry, art history and history. Being able to engage with poetry and contemporary art were the two key impacts that were reiterated by multiple students.

The first impact related to a transformed perception of the study of poetry. Many of the students reported that they were either afraid of poetry due to how it was taught at school, or simply unfamiliar with poetry as literature:

Poetry just never entered my orbit. (Interview 18)

However, upon completion of the module, Access students reported that they were confident they now knew how to approach poetry. Examples referred to the way the study diamond framework was used throughout to look at how a poem was constructed, underpinning a ‘way-in’ to a poem which might, on first read, appear impenetrable:

...poetry ... has always been a bit inaccessible to me so having a few tools to begin to understand how to make sense of it was rewarding. (Interview 12)

One student, demonstrating a real affinity with what they had been taught, commented that they felt that:

...iambic pentameter was quite useful ... because we speak in iambic pentameter, ... and it's the echoing of...the heartbeat, ...a comforting sound. (interview 29)

Another student reported that they:

...don't have a fear of poetry anymore... know that you don't have to necessarily understand all of it... you can take your time trying to understand it, to feel it. (Interview 1)

This is perhaps a reminder of the bravery/courage with which some Access students deliberately step out of their comfort zones:

The Access module teaches to not be afraid of new areas. (Interview 16)

It also reveals the extent to which ‘taken-for-granted’ cultural capital in the arts and humanities benefits from carefully designed scaffolding:

Poetry was not my strong point...it has helped me analyse a piece of poetry because before it was kind of...sparks coming out of my ears. (Interview 7)

The second substantial impact in which students recorded a greater confidence was that of art history and contemporary art appreciation. Students on the Access module are introduced to a variety of paintings, and the Turner Prize (an annual prize awarded since 1984 to a contemporary visual artist) is used to prompt students to think about art and the contemporary canon. This can be a challenging learning experience for many students, the following comment a familiar response:

I certainly didn't know how to look at art and sort of have an opinion about it. (Interview 15)

Yet students often reported a transformation in how they felt about and how they approached the appreciation of modern art. One student commented how they moved from:

...no understanding of why something was a good painting...to realising that:

...working through ways to look at it and understand, you know, what it's about even if you don't always get all of it. (Interview 1)

The techniques used to help students engage with a work of art did seem to have an impact:

It's a bit like being a detective, trying to find out ...all the things that make the item what it is. (Interview 8)

This transformed the way some students thought about the discipline, and empowered them to engage:

I look at art in a totally different context, I actually look at a piece and try to analyse it (Interview 21)

It seems both poetry and art appreciation are aspects of a broad culture associated with the arts and humanities that might be considered beyond the scope and experience of many students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Access students we spoke with reported a lack of experience in studying those subjects, and a very limited exposure to the arts within everyday life. This cultural capital gap contributes to Access students' initial lack of confidence in approaching certain aspects of the arts and humanities in an academic way.

However, it is noteworthy that most students were far more comfortable with being introduced to the study of history, with many stating a perspective like:

I loved the history. (Interview 8)

This may be because, as our students told us, they were far more familiar with studying history at school, and many retained a broad interest in history in their adult lives through television and film – so it was already more accessible. However, it is important to recognise that this arts and humanities Access module provided the tools for students to systematically approach what for them were the more challenging disciplines (a piece of art or a poem). By introducing a structured way of progressing from an initial personal response, and then looking to techniques to support that response in an academic way, a bridge was offered to a more inclusive cultural capital, and embedded discipline-related skills which sustained into undergraduate study.

We were intrigued that this acquired cultural capital could also impact on life outside university:

A lawyer that I used to work with, we meet up once a year and we went out to a gallery in London and he was basically saying contemporary art is just rubbish, so I managed because of what I learnt I managed to argue otherwise with him (Interview 24)

It also seemed important for genuine accessibility that the arts and humanities were deliberately introduced through interdisciplinary themes:

The more you know the more it interweaves, doesn't it? (Interview 20).

I feel like exploring different subjects, you have to keep an open mind and that's what I've learned. (Interview 5)

These connections are important aspects of cultural capital than can easily be taken for granted if the arts and humanities remain exclusive and highly selective:

I love arts and interdisciplinary study because you never quite know when something's going to crop up somewhere else. (Interview 20).

Unlike students who study preparatory curriculum at a campus-based university, or via a college with face-to-face tuition, students who have studied the Access module through the Open University's distance learning tuition do not need to try to conflate a separate 'academic identity' to run alongside their established identity in their everyday lives. They are studying within their own context and mapping their learning onto themselves as they incorporate it into their routines. This integrity of identity means that they quickly feel more comfortable with the changes that their learning brings, and with demonstrating their newly acquired skills and knowledge to the other people in their lives.

3. The impact of an interdisciplinary arts access module extends into personal life-wide confidence: A counternarrative to employability

While discourses around HE in the UK have for many years been dominated by metrics associated with employability and the perceived value of STEM subjects to the economic health of the country, the rarely-heard voices of adult students preparing to study the arts and humanities as elicited in this research can offer a counternarrative. The intrinsic value of accessing HE for an individual from a disadvantaged background is seldom asserted, yet:

I'm more curious now and I want to know more and I have an appetite for learning much more... (Interview 24)

This is a familiar trope from adult education literature, a transformative cultural awakening. However, it represents a perspective on the value of HE too often drowned out by the kind of extrinsic justification that HE's purpose is solely about increased earnings. Yet, the impact of studying the Access module at a personal level can be profound:

I'm at that stage now where I'm watching programmes on the TV that I wouldn't normally have watched (Interview 33)

Supporting disadvantaged students to learn about accessing a more diverse culture opens-up people to new ideas and new perspectives. Because the adult learners in our research had enjoyed their Access module, they were more likely to become lifelong learners and to see opportunities to learn they had previously ignored. But a much more profound impact was described by some of our previously more vulnerable students:

I'm a recovering addict, I'm like ten years sober...I wanted a little bit more in my life...I'm pretty kind of raw and new to it...I've had to learn a whole new language. (Interview 15)

This is the kind of personal transformation absent from much of the pedagogic literature, and was by no means a unique perspective:

...so I'm talking to BT (UK provider of telephone/internet services) now which I would have never done before ... and I used to have friends do it for me now and now I do everything myself, I'm completely confident, I look after myself and it's actually helped me overall with many more things than just studying. (Interview 10)

This idea of a confidence boost which extends life-wide is a crucial impact on individuals concerned. Can we position preparatory study in the arts and humanities more explicitly as one element in addressing nationwide concern at the

increasing impact of mental health difficulties, amplified by the COVID crisis, which leave so many dependent on stretched support systems? Could the increased confidence expressed by Access learners enable students with disabilities to thrive in their everyday lives? Students who enjoyed the experience of studying the arts and humanities were motivated by a range of drivers beyond a simplistic mantra of employability. They also benefitted in unexpected ways:

I usually have a hearing dog but she passed away in December and I'm at the top of the waiting list still for a replacement and I found that before doing this course I couldn't go out without a dog but I have been going out without a dog and I've managed better than I thought I ever would. (Interview 27)

There is something powerful happening if engagement with an entry level arts and humanities module can alter someone's mental state and personal resilience so profoundly.

Conclusions

While the self-selecting sample of students quoted in this article may limit the conclusions that can be drawn, the findings do suggest that mature, part-time students who succeeded on the arts Access module at the OU were prepared effectively for subsequent study. In the context of an open entry institution, participation had been successfully widened for students from disadvantaged backgrounds with low prior-entry qualifications. Students on the Access module who previously reporting a lack of confidence and a feeling of not being good enough to study at HE level, enjoyed being introduced to arts and humanities content in an inclusive way. Because preparatory skills development was embedded in the module material and regular feedback was given on progress in academic skills, students learned with their tutor, as engaged participants. They had acquired the pragmatics of generic studentship skills, including managing time and organising their own writing, as well as hybrid skills especially important in arts and humanities, such as efficient notetaking and using guidance in feedback to improve their own writing. Crucially, Access students had courageously taken a step-back from merely asserting their own opinion and were able to see subjects more deeply, in a more rounded way and with a fresh eye.

However, we report the 'Access effect' also extended to personal transformation. The module gave adult learners the courage to overcome the fear they carried of subjects seen as daunting at school (poetry) or as exclusive and removed from their lives (contemporary art). Learning in the arts and humanities led to new confidence to discuss a text in an informed, 'academic' way, which enhanced a personal sense of worth. Access students reported their lives unexpectedly enriched beyond formal learning, a transformative awakening of enhanced cultural capital. This impact, one of crucial intrinsic value, offers an important counter-narrative to a prevailing paradigm in which access to HE is valued solely for its economic benefit.

We referred in the introduction to the early history of this journal twenty years ago, when editorials and articles identified the potential impact of widening participation to learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, and queried whether, without appropriate preparation, early drop out would result. Despite major sector resources spent on widening participation in the intervening years, and the plethora of research and related publications on closing attainment gaps for disadvantaged groups across HE, it would be difficult to argue we have come far in understanding what works in preparing a wider group of learners for access to the arts and humanities. By exploring the impact of an Access module on adult learners in this article, we hope to galvanise further interest in this crucial conundrum for the disciplines.

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